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Teaching Writing to Children and Adolescents

Author Biography

The Writing Life of Jane Austen

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 to George and Cassandra Austen. She was the youngest of seven children and one of only two girls. George, Jane’s father, was the reverend at the Steventon rectory in Hampshire England and this would be the setting in which Jane wrote her most famous novels. Jane had a close bond with her father. He provided her and all her siblings many opportunities to be creative, but especially nurtured Jane’s writing by providing her with an extensive library and the proper tools for writing. The Austen family spent time reenacting plays or creating performances based on their readings. This fostered in Jane a love for creating and she learned “through observation, improvisation, acting, and participation” (Warren).

Jane’s formal education only lasted for a short time when she was sent to boarding school with her sister. By 1786, both Austen girls had returned home to be only educated by her mother. Jane was only 11-years-old, but had already started writing “novels” or papers she bound together containing her stories, which she would give as gifts her family members.

In 1795, Jane, now 20-years-old begins writing “Elinor & Marianne.” Her father attempted to have the novel published, but during this time the writing and/or reading novels was fairly new. People did not think of novels as having literary merit because the genre was so new in England. Jane once described her family as “great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so” in response to people’s criticism at the time.

In 1808, George Austen, Jane’s father, passes away and Mrs. Austen and her two daughters are sent to live in a cottage on a property owned by Jane’s brother, Frank. It would be in this setting that Jane would feel her most success. After much revision, “Elinor and Marianne” becomes *Sense and Sensibility* (Ray 18). Her literary agent and brother, Henry, makes the deal to have *Sense and Sensibility* published in 1811, fourteen years after it was first written. This novel would be Jane’s first financial success and would sell out completely by 1813. In that same year Jane would publish *Pride and Prejudice.*  Due to the success of her first book, the publisher does more in the way of marketing *Pride and Prejudice* to Jane’s “fans.” By October the same year it was published, a second printing of *Pride and Prejudice* would be ordered (Warren).

Jane was very consistent with keeping her novels in the realm in which she herself lived. Her characters were extensions of herself that she used to express her feelings about life and the world. In *Pride and Prejudice* one character expresses, “I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book! -- When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library” which is in keeping with her family’s love of reading and that her father did keep an extensive library while at the rectory.

*Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* are both stories that explore the roles of women during the 18th and 19th century. These novels specifically focus on the roles couples and families take on during courtship and eventual marriage. Jane used her real life experiences with Tom Lefroy as a model for the interactions of the characters in her novels. In real life, Lefroy’s family did not approve of the match between him and Jane because she did not come from wealth. Despite the young couple being fond of one another, due to his family’s disapproval, no proposal was made. Jane would never claim to love another man after this. At age 27, she was proposed to by Harriss Bigg-Wither, but Jane had to decline even though he was wealthy enough to have supported her entire family. In a letter she later wrote to her niece she offers the advice “simply no to wed if the affection is not there” (Warren). This sentiment is also mimicked in *Pride and Prejudice* when the heroin in the story is proposed to by a man who could financially support her, but for whom she is not in love and she must decline.

The success of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* would lead to her publishing four more novels: *Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey, Persuasion,* and *Emma*. Despite her popularity and success, at age 41, there was a noticeable decline in Jane’s health and even walking was too difficult for her. Her sister and brother would take her to London, but no cure would be found for her disease. Jane would pass away on July 18, 1817 at the age of 42. Due to her status she was buried at Winchester Cathedral where her readers could visit her (Warren).

Jane Austen embodied her female characters. She was “strong natured [and] headstrong” (Warren). Like those characters it is believed Jane sought to be loved, but unfortunately it was not meant to be. Many argue this is the main reason why we get the great work that is loved by so many. Despite only having written six novels, she lives on in the readers who love her and the new generations who discover her. “There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me” (Austen).

Works Cited

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